



Hepatitis A (Infectious Hepatitis) and Food Handlers

Health Education Facts

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a virus that causes liver disease. The disease is mild in children, but can be more severe in adults and can cause infected individuals to miss up to 6 weeks of work.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Symptoms often appear about one month after infection, but can develop anytime between 2 to 6 weeks after infection. Infected persons may experience fever, extreme weakness, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps, and diarrhea. These symptoms are usually followed by a few days of dark, "tea-colored" urine and jaundice (yellow skin and eyes).

How is hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus is found in the feces (stool) of infected persons. Hepatitis A virus is not spread through blood, but is spread primarily through the fecal-oral route. Infected food handlers may carry the virus on their hands and may contaminate ready-to-eat food when they do not use good handwashing practices after every restroom visit and have bare hand contact with ready-to-eat food. For the disease to spread, the virus must enter the mouth of a person who has not had hepatitis A before **or** is not immunized against hepatitis A. Good handwashing after toileting and no bare hand contact with ready-to-eat food can greatly reduce the spread of hepatitis A from an infected food handler to others.

How long can an infected person spread hepatitis A?

An infected person can spread the virus for 1 to 2 weeks before symptoms start and up to 10 days after jaundice. Therefore, an infected person may potentially shed hepatitis A virus for almost one month.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. Bed rest and avoiding alcohol, drugs, and over-the-counter medicines is recommended for a faster recovery. Once recovered, a person cannot spread the disease further, is immune for life and cannot be infected with

hepatitis A again.



Are food handlers at higher risk for hepatitis A?

Food handlers are not at higher risk than other persons for becoming infected with hepatitis A. However, infected food handlers are at higher *public health risk* for spreading hepatitis A to others. Food handlers have the potential to infect hundreds of people if they work while infected with hepatitis A, do not use good handwashing techniques, and have bare hand contact with ready-to-eat food.

What should be done if a food handler is experiencing symptoms of hepatitis A?

If a food handler is experiencing symptoms of hepatitis A, the food handler should be excluded from foodhandling immediately, should seek medical care, and should not return to foodhandling until 2 weeks after the beginning of the illness.

What should be done for co-workers of a food handler infected with hepatitis A?

Co-workers, who worked the same days and shifts of a food handler infected with hepatitis A, should not be allowed to handle food until they receive a shot of immune globulin (IG) to help prevent hepatitis A **or** show proof of previous infection or previous vaccination. The co-workers may return to foodhandling if they receive IG or provide proof of immunity and are not experiencing any symptoms. If the co-workers refuse IG, they are not allowed to handle food for 50 days starting from their last contact to the infected food handler during the time when the food handler was still contagious.



Hepatitis A and Food Handlers (continued)

Health Education Facts

If a person receives Immune globulin (IG), is this person immune for life?

No. IG protects a person who has not been infected with hepatitis A for up to 3 months. IG provides protection if it is given before exposure to the hepatitis A virus **or** if it is given within 14 days of exposure to the virus. However, getting IG does not guarantee complete protection against hepatitis A, especially if a person has been exposed to the virus multiple times. IG may make the symptoms milder in a person already infected with hepatitis A.

Are there any health regulations for food handlers infected with hepatitis A?

Yes. To protect the public's health, food handlers infected with hepatitis A cannot handle food until 2 weeks after they started having symptoms. (K.A.R. 28-1-6.) All food handlers should also follow the Kansas Food Code 3-301.11, which prohibits bare hand contact with ready-to-eat food by any food worker.

What are the potential consequences of a food handler who works while infected with hepatitis A?

A food handler who works while infected with hepatitis A has the potential to infect hundreds of customers who have eaten food prepared by the infected worker. The risk of spreading the hepatitis A virus and other diseases increases if the infected food handler has bare hand contact with ready-to-eat food. This risk increases even more when an infected food handler has bare hand contact with ready-to-eat food and does not wash his/her hands properly after toileting. When customers have eaten food prepared by a worker infected with hepatitis A, the media is often the most efficient way of informing customers of their possible risk of and treatment options for infection with hepatitis A. This customer recall may affect a restaurant's business, reputation, and financial stability.

How can food handlers prevent the spread of hepatitis A?

1. Food handlers should never work while ill with fever, nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps, or diarrhea. If a food handler is experiencing any of these symptoms, he/she should immediately stop working, inform the manager, and seek medical care.
2. Food handlers should always use good handwashing techniques, especially after using the restroom. The proper handwashing method is the following:
 - (a) use soap and warm, running water;
 - (b) rub hands together vigorously for 20 seconds;
 - (c) wash all surfaces, including backs of hands, wrists, between fingers, tips of fingers, under fingernails;
 - (d) rinse hands well; and
 - (e) dry hands with a paper towel, if possible.
3. Food handlers should not have bare hand contact with ready-to-eat food. If gloves are used, hands must be washed before putting on gloves. Gloves should be used for only one task and then discarded. Gloves should also be replaced with clean gloves whenever food preparation has been interrupted.

NOTE: Glove usage does not replace the need for good handwashing practices.
4. A vaccine that protects against hepatitis A virus is available and can be used to prevent infection in food handlers.

Is there a vaccine that protects against hepatitis A?

Yes. The hepatitis A vaccine was licensed in the U.S. in June 1995 and is safe and effective for the prevention of hepatitis A. The vaccine is a two-dose series, with the second dose given 6 to 12 months after the first dose. Nearly everyone is protected one month after receiving the first dose, but a second vaccine is given for lifelong protection.